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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000151

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SUBJECT: IRANIAN DISSIDENT DISCUSSES CONDITION OF AHWAZI ARABS

Classified By: CDA Alan G. Misenheimer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On January 29, A/Polcouns and Poloff met with Ahmad Eidan Neisi (PROTECT/PROTECT), an Iranian Shi'a cleric and political dissident from the Ahwaz region of southwestern Iran. Neisi sought a meeting with Poloffs to discuss the dire social and economic conditions of Ahwazi ethnic Arabs, and to deliver a report enumerating the Ahwazis' many grievances against the Government of Iran (GOI). He spoke of systematic GOI oppression of Ahwazi Arabs, widespread human rights violations, an "Ahwazi intifada," and the Ahwazi diaspora. Neisi also touched on the Iranian regime's religious underpinnings and its regional influence, including its efforts in Iraq. (Note: Post will transmit Neisi's report, drafted in Arabic, to NEA/IR via email. Bio information provided in paragraph 10.) End summary.

Systematic Discrimination

¶2. (C) Neisi spoke at length about the GOI's systematic discrimination against the Ahwazi ethnic Arabs and its repercussions. According to Neisi, there are approximately seven million ethnic Arabs currently living in Southwestern Iran. They are concentrated in the region's 15 main cities, with roughly two million Arabs living in the city of Ahwaz itself. The GOI has renamed each of the region's cities in Farsi since incorporating Ahwaz into Iran 80 years ago. According to Neisi, the GOI prohibits Arabic language and dress and arrests Ahwazis for even mentioning their cities' Arabic names. Schools no longer teach Arabic language, and security agents have infiltrated all levels of Ahwazi society. State-approved clerics dominate the local courts.

¶3. (C) Neisi complained bitterly about widespread unemployment among Ahwazi Arabs. He said the GOI deliberately imports ethnic Persians to displace the Ahwazis, providing the Persians with relocation incentives such as new cars and free housing in gated communities. Neisi said ethnic Arabs constitute only 2-3 percent of the work force in the region's main industries, petroleum and agriculture, even though Arabs constitute percent 65 of the overall population in the region. Pervasive unemployment has resulted in devastating social consequences. Drugs are cheap and openly available, and drug abuse is prevalent. According to Neisi, the GOI has encouraged this situation in order to "destroy the Arab youth." Open sewers and generally filthy living conditions have promoted disease and increased mortality rates. Access to health care is limited since Ahwazis cannot afford to pay medical fees.

¶4. (C) According to Neisi, the GOI deliberately disrupted electricity and water supplies to the region in the summer of

2006 for, on average, seven hours per day. Clean drinking water is expensive and in short supply. In addition, the GOI deliberately pollutes the local Qaroon River with industrial runoff and medical waste. Korean and Japanese scientific teams reportedly declared the waters of the Qaroon River "not even suitable for animals." Local farmers use this river to irrigate their crops, resulting in low agricultural yields and spoiled acreage.

15. (C) Neisi added that the GOI also heavily restricts freedom of speech and freedom of the press. It routinely confiscates satellite dishes, controls all local newspapers, and broadcasts state media solely in Farsi (despite its use of local dialects in other regions of Iran). GOI agents also routinely raid Ahwazi households and confiscate suspect media, accusing the Arabs of being "U.S. agents." Furthermore, the GOI prevents Ahwazi university students from studying certain subjects, such as political science, aeronautical engineering and nuclear physics.

16. (C) Neisi said the state dominates local religious worship as well. GOI imams from Qom conduct prayers and sermons at Ahwazi mosques exclusively in Farsi in an attempt to suppress the region's Arab culture. Ahwazi mosques receive no financial support from the GOI and opposition clerics are labeled adherents of Saudi Wahabism or accused of being "Americanized." In Qom, GOI clerics accuse Ahwazi imams of being "deviants from Wilayat al-Fakih" (clerical rule) and reportedly fear their influence, which they find "as dangerous as a katyusha rocket." Due to religious persecution, "hundreds" of Ahwazi imams have emigrated from Iran and now preach in Syria and Kuwait.

The Ahwazi Intifada

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17. (C) According to Neisi, the GOI's systematic persecution led to a revolt among hundreds of thousands of Ahwazi Arabs in April 2005. The insurgents reportedly attacked local government ministries, burned banks and raided police stations. Neisi claims the GOI deployed 150,000 soldiers to quell the rebellion, and that hundreds died in the ensuing violence throughout Ahwaz, Mashour and Kura provinces. Local hospitals reportedly refused to treat injured Ahwazi Arabs. Since the April 2005 intifada, there have been additional clashes with GOI security forces and Persian settlers, prompting the Iranian regime to build regional detention camps and implement even stricter control over communications and travel. Consequently, Ahwazi Arabs now frequently discuss the prospect of independence from Iran, which they claim would be "worthless without Ahwazi oil." According to Neisi, approximately 70 percent of the local populace is lightly armed, having obtained weapons from Iraq since 2003.

Displacement and Diaspora

18. (C) Neisi described a GOI policy of deliberately displacing the Ahwazi Arabs from their ancestral homeland, particularly along the border with Iraq. Many Ahwazis left the border region during the Iran/Iraq War for fear of being drafted by the GOI or of being used as agents by the Iraqis. The region remains scarred by the decade-long conflict, while the GOI has offered no incentives for Ahwazis to return. Many have not, and today ethnic Persians dominate these towns and villages. Former President Mohammad Al-Khatami is reported to have said that the GOI would "displace Arabs from Ahwaz to Tabriz, Shiraz and Isfahan and move in Persians." Accordingly, an Ahwazi diaspora has ensued, with tens of thousands of ethnic Arabs relocating to the Afghan border region, Kuwait, UAE, Iraq, Syria, Turkey and the West.

Iran and its Regional Influence

¶9. (C) Neisi said the Iranian government exploits religion to deceive the world, legitimize its regime and advance its own political objectives. He claimed the GOI is spending billions on its proxy, Hizballah, and has compensated it for the recent Nahar Al-Barid conflict in Lebanon. Iran is also supporting upwards of 40 different insurgent groups in Iraq to incite ethnic violence and destabilize the country. Neisi spoke of one noteworthy individual, Abu Dera Al-Baghdadi, allegedly residing in Tehran, who reportedly boasted of killing hundreds of Sunnis in Iraq. Neisi noted, however, that the GOI distrusts Ahwazi Arabs and refuses to use them as agents in Iraq. He said all Iranians oppose President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, particularly the Ahwazis, and he called Syria's Bashar Al-Asad "an agent of Iran" for ordering the expulsion of Awhazi Arabs from his country.

Biographic Note

¶10. (C) Ahmad Eidan Neisi is an Iranian Shi'a cleric of Arab descent. He is a political dissident who claims to speak on behalf of the Al-Muhammadia Religious Community (Al-Jaamia Al-Deenia Al-Mohammadia), a group of approximately 150 ethnic Arab clerics, university students, civil servants, journalists and intellectuals based in Ahwaz. He was born on Oct. 23, 1983, he is married with children, currently resides in the city of Ahwaz with his family, and is attempting to emigrate with them to the U.K. Neisi is in Kuwait for approximately three weeks and contacted A/Polcouns on January 28 to request a meeting concerning the condition of ethnic Arabs in Ahwaz.

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